DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 334 EA 029 712

AUTHOR	DeKalb, Jay
TITLE	Student Truancy. ERIC Digest, Number 125.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, OR.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-EA-99-1
PUB DATE	1999-04-00
NOTE	3p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-C0-0011
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5207.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Attendance Patterns; Delinquency Prevention; Elementary Secondary Education; *Prevention; Program Descriptions; Student Welfare; *Truancy; Youth Problems
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This Digest examines some of the ways that truancy affects both individuals and society. It identifies factors that may place students at greater risk of becoming truant and lists some consequences of nonattendance, including delayed promotion and graduation, lowered self-esteem, and lessened employment potential. The causes of truancy vary among individuals. Guidelines for creating effective attendance policies should be consistently enforced, and absences should be followed up by a telephone call or a letter. Many school districts have adopted a hardline approach to reducing unexcused absenteeism; in one such district, truancy rates were reduced 45 percent when truants and their parents were taken to court. Data also show that truancy can be controlled within the school; the power of peer influence was revealed in one study in which 84 percent of the interviewed truants said their friends skipped school. Administrators may also use new software to track student absences. Ways in which the community can become involved include pairing students with volunteer mentors who then work to foster students' career interests, or special programs where students not attending school are reported to the county attorney who then works to help the students back into the school and/or work environment. (RJM)

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ERIC DIGEST

APRIL 1999 NUMBER 125 EDO-EA-99-1

Student Truancy

By Jay DeKalb

Truancy has been labeled one of the top ten major problems in this country's schools, negatively affecting the future of our youth. In fact, absentee rates have reached as high as 30 percent in some cities. The statistics speak for themselves.

- In New York City, about 150,000 out of 1,000,000 students are absent daily. School officials are unsure what portion of the absences are legitimately excusable.
- The Los Angeles Unified School District reports that 10 percent of its students are absent each day. A mere half of these students return with written excuses.
- Detroit's forty public school attendance officers investigated 66,440 truant complaints during the 1994-95 school year (Ingersoll and LeBoeuf 1997).

This Digest examines some of the ways truancy affects both individuals and society, and identifies factors that may place students at greater risk of becoming truant. Guidelines for creating effective attendance policies are considered, and various responses to the problem are described, with the goal of making it easier for districts to implement policies that work for them.

What Are Some Consequences of Nonattendance?

Student nonattendance is a problem that extends much further than the school. It affects the student, the family, and the community.

The Los Angeles County Office of Education identifies truancy as the most powerful predictor of delinquency. Police departments across the nation report that many students not in school during regular hours are committing crimes, including vandalism, shoplifting, and graffiti. When Van Nuys, California, officials conducted a three-week sweep for truants on the streets, shoplifting arrests dropped by 60 percent (Garry 1996).

Absenteeism is detrimental to students' achievement, promotion, graduation, self-esteem, and employment potential. Clearly, students who miss school fall behind their peers in the classroom. This, in turn, leads to low self-esteem and increases the likelihood that at-risk students will drop out of school.

In a longitudinal study of African-American males, Robins and Ratcliff (1978) found that of those students who were often truant in elementary school and truant in high school, 75 percent failed to graduate. Failure to graduate, in turn, is associated with diminished earning potential in adulthood and other poor outcomes.

What Are Some Causes of Truancy?

Before determining the most effective means of controlling unexcused absences, the causes of truant behavior must be understood. Not only may the cause vary from individual to individual, but school staff and students may disagree about the underlying causes. Although many teachers may be empathetic and willing to help students, this difference in opinion may create a barrier of understanding between teacher and student.

In one survey, students cited boredom and loss of interest in school, irrelevant courses, suspensions, and bad relationships with teachers as the major factors in their decision to skip school. On the other hand, most of the school staff believed truancy to be related primarily to student problems with family and peers (ERIC/CEM and Linn-Benton Education Service District 1992).

Are There Guidelines for Creating Effective Attendance Policies?

The National Association of Secondary School Principals makes several recommendations concerning attendance policies that work:

- The policies should be strong. Schools that invest thought and effort into solving the problem make the most headway.
- Participation in the formulation of the attendance policies should be broadly based.
- Attendance expectations, as well as consequences of good and poor attendance, should be specified in writing.
- Policies should be well publicized.
- Policies should be consistently enforced at every level—by teacher, counselor, and principal.
- Absences should be followed up by a telephone call or a letter (cited in Bartlett and others 1978).

Solutions can be divided into four categories: strict laws and regulations, in-school programs, computer technology, and community solutions (Gullatt and Lemoine 1997). Each solution addresses a different set of risk factors; therefore, specific categories or combinations of solutions should be considered when creating an attendance policy.

What Tough Approaches Can Be Taken To Address the Problem of Nonattendance?

Many school districts adopt a hard-line approach to reducing unexcused absenteeism. This angle of attack is normally enacted as a means of breaking the truant-to-criminal evolution. It discourages kids from skipping school by imposing penalties on parents and on the students themselves.

In Tulsa County, Oklahoma, sixteen school districts are using a variety of methods to reduce truancy, but

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none has been as successful as taking truants (and their parents) to court. "Family outreach" police officers are used to investigate unexcused absences. Three years after the policy was implemented, 600 cases had been prosecuted, resulting in 300 convictions in which a parent was fined and mandated to attend counseling. Hundreds of kids are back in school, and the county has seen a 45 percent reduction in the district's dropout rate. The districts were able to implement this policy at virtually no cost to the schools due to the districts' increase in funding that resulted from higher average daily attendance statistics (Wilson 1993).

Many states allow or require school systems to grade student achievement on factors other than quality and quantity of work. These schools may have the authority to refuse a student credit on homework assigned the day of absence, providing the absence is unexcused. Course credit may be denied if the student misses class a specified number of times, ranging from 5 to 20 times per term, depending on the school.

In the 1982-83 school year, the Austin (Texas) Independent School District adopted a policy that allowed only 10 absences (excused or unexcused) per semester before loss of course credit. That year attendance shot up to 93.5 percent (Gullatt and Lemoine).

Can Truancy Be Controlled from Within the School?

Yes, definitely. Peers have an undeniable influence on students' decision to become truant. One study reported that 84 percent of the interviewed truants said their friends skipped school. Antitruancy programs that expose truants to other peer groups and other methods of interaction may be effective in reducing truancy.

Afterschool sports or other programs at the school site give students a chance to make new friends, experience a positive atmosphere, and feel a sense of accomplishment, which, in turn, may reduce their likelihood of skipping school.

The learning environment is also important to student performance. Teachers must arrive on time, give students frequent praise, interact with the entire class (preferably asking open-ended questions), minimize verbal reprimands and other forms of punishment, and deemphasize competition in the classroom (Rohrman 1993).

A Kentucky high school "requires" that teachers compliment marginal students as well as offering them opportunities to succeed daily (Rohrman).

The Osiris School Administration Program, a software package that allows administrators to maintain accurate, up-to-date, detailed information on each student, is being adopted nationally. The program contacts parents of absent students on a daily basis. After the fifth and ninth absence, warning phone calls and computer-generated messages are sent, totaling thirteen contacts to the families. The number of contacts made by the program may be altered to adhere to state or local attendance policies (Gullatt and Lemoine).

How Can the Community Become Involved?

Extensive career exploration and related career education before and during high school are important for developing educational goals and setting timelines for achieving those goals. Creating an awareness of career possibilities and related interests eases the school-to-work transition.

The Peninsula Academies Program at Menlo-Atherton High School and Sequoia High School in California pairs students with volunteer mentors from companies that are aligned with students' career interests. The mentors acquaint students with the world of work and help parents formulate career plans with their children. Students begin the program in the tenth grade and receive three years of computer or electronics instruction. The curriculum is highly work-related and, as an incentive to graduate, students are guaranteed a job after they complete the program (Naylor 1987).

Another approach to community involvement is the At-School, On Time, Ready to Work program that has been implemented in Kansas. Students under sixteen years old who are not attending school are reported to the county attorney. He invites them to sign a ninety-day program contract that provides the following: a supervision worker to verify the student's school attendance and to meet with the student several times a week; a support group and therapy services that teach self-esteem and confidence-building skills; and support and education services for the student's parents, focusing on effective parenting techniques and the importance of their child's education (Garry).

The problem of student nonattendance will never disappear entirely. Some students willingly attend school, but others do not, often because of negative factors or influences in their lives. These students require intervention, for the benefits of regular attendance may be the difference between a lifetime of burdens and a lifetime of accomplishments. By addressing related risk factors with an attendance policy that works, teachers and administrators can give students a much better chance of succeeding.

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A Product of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management • College of Education, University of Oregon • Eugene, Oregon 97403-5207

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract No. ED-99-C0-0011. The ideas and opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, ED, or the Clearinghouse. This Digest is in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. EA 629 712.